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AUTHOR Tjosvold, Dean; Santamaria, Philip
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ABSTRACT

Seventy-seven fourth- and fifth-grade students were placed in either a cooperative or a competititve learning structure and the teacher either supported or did not support their decision-making competence. As hypothesized, students whose teacher supported them indicated that they were more confident and committed to making a classroom decision than were students whose teacher did not support them. Unexpectedly, students whose teacher did not support them indicated that they felt they had gained more peer support than students whose teacher did support them. Students in the cooperative learning structure indicated that they had more peer support and had higher expectations about the decision-making experience. They did not indicate significantly greater confidence or commitment to making the decision than did students in the competitive learning structure. Results were interpreted as suggesting that teacher support and cooperative interaction can help students develop more favorable attitudes toward opportunities to make classroom decisions. (Author)

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The Effects of Cooperation and Teacher Support on Student Attitudes Toward Classroom Decision-Making

Dean Tjosvold

and

Philip Santamaria

The Pennsylvania State University
419 Carpenter Building
University Park, Pa. 16802

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The Effects of Cooperation and Teacher Support on Student Attitudes Toward Classroom Decision-Making

Decisions are continually being made in the classroom so that students and educators can coordinate their activities. Many educators are dissatisfied with the traditional procedure in which the teacher is responsible for making the decisions and for making the students comply with these decisions. Educational research, such as the influential studies on leadership and social climates (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; White & Lippitt, 1960) and several teacher observation programs (e.g., Flanders, 1959; Harvey, Prather, White, & Hoffmeister, 1968; Withall, 1949), appear to have contributed to this dissatisfaction. Some educational researchers (e.g., Chesler & Lohman, 1971; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1974) have argued that social psychological research (see reviews by Bucklow, 1966; Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970; Tjosvold, 1977) suggests that when students help make classroom decisions they are more committed to learning and to classroom rules and procedures. Students have been given the opportunity to make school decisions with apparent favorable results (e.g., Kohlberg, 1975).

Though some educators are persuaded that they should provide opportunities for students to make classroom decisions, students must be willing to use these opportunities fully if the hypothesized benefits of student involvement in decision-making are to be realized. Little research, however, has attempted to identify the conditions under which students

actually accept a more responsible role in making decisions. Two variables that may affect student willingness to make classroom decisions are investigated in this study: Teacher support of the students and the previous cooperative or competitive interaction of the students.

Teachers may be able to modify the attitudes of students toward classroom decision-making by clearly supporting their competence to do so. Rhea (1968) has argued that students often resist taking a more active role in making school decisions due in part to their beliefs that educators are much more able to make effective decisions than they are. In this way, students can escape the burdens both of making decisions and of learning how to make decisions.

Research (e.g., Hovland & Rosenberg, 1960; Johnson & Matross, 1975) suggests that these attitudes can be modified, especially when the person attempting to change the attitudes is viewed as a credible and dynamic expert. This research implies that a teacher who can credibly and convincingly convey that he believes the students have the competence and knowledge to make effective decisions may counteract the attitudes of at least some students that they are unable to make useful decisions. Students may then be confident that they as a group can make decisions and, when given the opportunity, may be committed to making decisions rather than relying on the teacher to make them.

Because students make classroom decisions as a group, their previous interaction and their consequent attitudes toward

each other may also have important effects on their acceptance of classroom decision-making responsibility. Specifically, students who have interacted within a cooperative learning structure may believe their group has developed cohesion so that they can effectively make decisions together. A cooperative learning structure exists when the students perceive their goals as positively correlated (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1975); the students believe that they can attain their goals only to the extent that the other students reach their goals. A competitive learning structure exists when the students perceive their goals as negatively correlated (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1975); students believe that they can attain their goals only to the extent the other students fail to reach theirs.

Considerable research (e.g., Anderson, 1939; Deutsch, 1949; De Vries, Muse, & Wells, 1971; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Wheeler & Ryan, 1973) indicate that students who have interacted within a cooperative learning structure like and support each other, influence each other effectively, perceive common interests and similarities, and develop group cohesion because of their mutual goal facilitation. Students in competition, on the other hand, have been found to feel frustrated by each other, perceive few shared interests, and to suspect each other. Students who have cooperated with each other may then come to believe that their group has developed the cohesion that will allow them to make decisions in a positive and enjoyable manner. Given this assurance, these students may then be

confident and committed to making classroom decisions.

Based on the above rationale, the following hypotheses concerning the attitudes of students toward the opportunity to make classroom decisions are proposed:

1. Students whose teacher supports their competence to make effective classroom decisions, compared to students whose teacher does not, are more confident and more committed to making classroom decisions.

2. Students who have interacted in a cooperative learning structure, compared to a competitive one, feel more support from the other students, expect a positive group decision-making experience, and are more confident and committed to making classroom decisions.

Method

Participants and Design

Seventy-seven students from the fourth and fifth grades of a school in a small town in central Pennsylvania were recruited to participate in the study. To control both for school class and for grade, students in each of the four classrooms were randomly assigned to the four treatment conditions. The students in each condition from each classroom participated as one group in the study. Because of absences and unequal number of students in the classrooms not all the groups had the same number of students. Of the 16 groups, 13 had five members and three had four members. The date were collected in April, 1975.

The hypothesis implied a 2 x 2 factorial design. Learning structure (cooperative and competitive) was orthogonally crossed with teacher support

(supportive and nonsupportive) to form four treatment conditions. Following Johnson and Johnson (1975), the cooperative learning structure was induced by informing the students that (a) their goal was to learn together, (b) they were to share and help each understand the material, (c) they should discuss and list their ideas together; and (d) they would take a group test in which each person would contribute to the answers. Students in the competitive learning structure were told that (a) the goal was to learn the material better than the other students in their group, (b) they should not discuss their ideas with the other students, (c) they should study independently, and (d) they would take a test individually to determine who had learned the most in their group. These tests were administered at the end of the first lesson but were not scored or reported to the students.

The teachers expressed support or no support for the student decision-making immediately before the students were given the opportunity to decide the topic of the next lesson. In the support condition, the teacher told the students that they should make this decision because (a) the students would want to learn the lesson they chose, whereas a teacher cannot always be sure what the students want to learn and (b) the students were capable of making a good decision. The teacher told the students in the no support condition that (a) there was no good reason why students make classroom decisions and (b) the students probably could not make a good decision. The teachers made these statements in a credible and convincing manner. As suggested by Johnson and Matross (1975), they

communicated credibility and expertness by looking directly at the students, by speaking in a confident voice, and by making their arguments logical and concise.

The dependent variables were student commitment to making the decision, confidence in making the decision, expectations about the decision-making experience, and peer support. The students rated on 5-point scales the extent to which they felt supported by their peers, their expectations of the decision-making experience, and their confidence about making the decision. In addition, students indicated their commitment to making the decision by noting whether they wanted to make the decision or that they wanted the teacher to make the decision. These questions were posed to the students after a lesson on evaporation and before they were to make a decision about what they should learn next.

A lesson on liquid evaporation was adapted from Science for the Seventies (1973). This lesson was chosen because the students had not studied evaporation and were expected to be interested in it.

Procedure

The experimenter escorted each group of students from their regular class and brought them into a small room. He then introduced one of the four experimental teachers. The teacher then taught the lesson using the cooperative or competitive learning structure according to the participants' condition. The lesson lasted approximately 55 minutes. The teacher then informed the students that they as a group were to decide from a list of three what lesson they would like to have next. The teacher

either supported or did not support the students depending upon their condition. Then the experimental teacher left the room and the experimenter entered. He asked the students to complete independently a short questionnaire that included the measures of the dependent variables. After the questionnaires were collected, the students had a short decision-making session. The teacher taught the lesson selected by the student for about five minutes. The experimenter then re-entered and requested the students not to discuss the lesson with other students. They were thanked and escorted back to their regular classes. Two weeks after all the sessions were completed, the experimenter returned to the school to discuss the study and the hypotheses with the students.

The experimental teachers were four females recruited from an undergraduate education course at The Pennsylvania State University. They were trained in special sessions and a pilot study to teach in a standard way and to induce the experimental conditions. They were taught to establish cooperative and competitive learning structures and to support and not to support the students. Each teacher taught once in the four conditions. They were unaware of the hypotheses of the study.

Results

To test the hypotheses, students were placed in either a cooperative or competitive learning structure and had a teacher who either supported their decision-making or did not. Because a preliminary analysis indicated no significant differences due to experimental teacher or grade, the data were collapsed over these variables. According to the first hypothesis,

students whose teachers supported them were expected to be confident about making the decision and more committed to making the decision. As expected, the data (summarized in Table 1) suggest that students in the support condition, compared to those in the no support condition, indicated that they were committed to the students' making the decision rather than the teacher, $F(1,72)=9.51$, $p < .01$. In addition, students in

Insert Table 1 about here

the support condition were more confident about their group's making this decision than were students in the no support condition, $F(1,73)=11.93$, $p < .01$. Unexpectedly, students in the no support condition indicated that they felt more support from the other students than did students in the teacher support condition, $F(1,73)=7.95$, $p < .025$.

The second hypothesis suggests that students in cooperative learning structure feel more peer support, have positive expectations about making the decision, and are committed to making classroom decisions. As expected, students in the cooperative learning structure indicated that they felt more support than did students in the competitive condition, $F(1,73)=23.82$, $p < .01$. In addition, students in the cooperative structure indicated that they expected the decision-making experience to be enjoyable and productive, $F(1,73)=4.27$, $p < .05$. Unexpectedly, students in the cooperative and competitive conditions did not differ as to their commitment to students' making the decision rather than to have the teacher make the decision.

Discussion

Results highlight the potential effects of teacher support of the competence of students to make decisions on their attitudes toward the opportunity to make classroom decisions. Students whose teacher convincingly conveyed that they had the knowledge and competencies to make effective decisions indicated confidence and commitment to their making the decision rather than relying on the teacher to make it. Teacher support of their competence may be especially important because, as Rhea (1968) has argued, students may, because they lack confidence, often resist decision-making opportunities.

Unexpectedly, students whose teacher did not support their competence to make decisions indicated that they experienced greater support from their peers than did students whose teacher did support them. Perhaps students who experienced little support from their teacher exaggerated the support they did receive from the other students in order to combat fears that they were unsupportable. This result is consistent with the idea that students develop subcultures partially in response to their alienation from educators and other adults (Willower, 1965). Feeling little support from their teacher, students may have turned to each other and valued the support they did receive more highly (Brofenbrenner, 1974).

The prior interaction of students was hypothesized to affect whether they preferred to make the decision or for the teacher to make it. Cooperative interaction was expected to induce students to believe that they were a cohesive group that could make a decision in a positive and

enjoyable way; these students would then be confident and committed to making the decision. Students who did cooperate with each other indicated a greater degree of group cohesion and high expectations; however, these attitudes were not translated into increased confidence or commitment to making the decision. Results of this study then suggest that the belief of students that they are competent rather than that they have group cohesion contributes substantially to their commitment to making classroom decisions.

Previous research has indicated that competitive students from all grades want teachers to constrain student behavior (Johnson & Ahlgren, 1976). Results from this study suggest one explanation for this correlational finding. Competitive students may believe that, because their group lacks cohesion, they will be unable to develop and enforce their own norms of behavior and, therefore, educators must take an active disciplinary role. Research is needed to investigate the relationship between student competitiveness and the desire for external control.

Teachers have been urged to encourage students to make some classroom decisions (e.g., Schmuck & Schmuck, 1974). Evidence suggests that beginning teachers, perhaps because of their professional socialization in college, are committed to providing students opportunities to make decisions; however, these teachers appear to become less committed to doing so with experience (Hoy, 1967; 1969). Perhaps these teachers have found that students resist using these opportunities. Results from this study suggest that strong teacher support of their competence and perhaps

previous cooperative interaction may induce students to have more favorable attitudes to these opportunities. Future research is needed to investigate further effective methods of involving students in decision-making and, more generally, the conditions under which it is appropriate to do so.

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Dependent Variables: Means of Students' Ratings

Variable	No Support		Support		Significant Comparisons
	Competition	Cooperation	Competition	Cooperation	
Commitment	1.68	1.60	1.94	1.90	Supp vs No Supp ***
Confidence	2.63	3.50	4.00	3.75	Supp vs No Supp ***
Peer Support	3.53	4.75	3.00	4.00	Supp vs No Supp **
					Coop vs Comp ***
Expectation	4.16	4.60	4.16	4.55	Coop vs Comp *

Note: Only significant ($p < .05$) F results are presented. Commitment to students' making the decision was scored as 2; to the teacher as 1. The higher the score the greater the confidence, peer support, and expectations. N = 77, 19 in the competitive-no support, 20 in the cooperative-no support, 18 in the competitive-support, and 20 in the cooperative-support conditions. The analysis yielded no significant interactions.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .025$

*** $p < .01$